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THE MODERN RUSSIAN PIANOFORTE SONATA

By FREDERICK H. MARTENS

(Based on an Interview with M. Serge Prokofieff)

THE modern Russian pianoforte sonata is truly "modern," inasmuch as it is the result of a comparatively recent development, while at the same time a genuine tribute to the inherent vitality of one of the oldest of the more serious forms of pure music. The older Russian composers, and even the majority of those whose names are more prominently identified with the last decades of the nineteenth century, were not interested in the piano sonata. Pre-occupied with symphonic music, with the opera and ballet, they paid no attention, at a time when the piano sonata was largely cultivated by composers in France and Germany, to a form of composition which to-day is one of the most popular in Russia. Without counting works of lesser or dubious value by men of minor attainment, the most celebrated Russian composers of the last few decades have enriched the literature of the pianoforte sonata with more than thirty works, comprising much of the best piano music Russia has produced.

Any consideration of the modern Russian pianoforte sonata should begin with Scriabin—for he has done more for it than any other composer. And despite the fact that others wrote sonatas before him—among them Tschaikovsky (his Sonata Op. 37, seldom if ever played in public)—with Scriabin, both as regards quality and quantity, the Russian pianoforte sonata may be said to begin.

Looking at these sonatas of Scriabin's from the point of view of formal development, it might be said that those which most closely approximate the classic model do so largely owing to the complexity of their harmonic contents. It is in his last sonatas that this harmonic complexity has been clarified, has been made perspicuous until it represents the victory of the idea over complexity of form. It is in his Fifth Sonata—a species of preparatory sketch or essay for the *Poème d'Extase*, that he definitely leaves the tonalities and form of the classic sonata, and enters upon his

second period. The Sixth, Seventh and Eighth Sonatas are notable for their tremendous complexity of development, and the extreme application of Scriabin's harmonic scheme of a natural harmonic chord built up by fourths. In the Ninth Sonata he enters upon a new period wherein the quantitative note-element is lessened, the architectural outlines become clearer, a crystallization, so to speak of the complexities of its predecessor. The Tenth Sonata has been called "a pianoforte counterpart of the radiant *Prometheus*," and in truth it blinds and bewilders by the luminous manner in which the composer takes advantage of the simple beauty of the new means he employs. One cannot but regret that Death removed him at the moment when his mastery of his medium was so complete, and when he would undoubtedly have shown it in other wonderful works.

There is a popular impression, which one often encounters, that the piano sonata in several movements represents the classic type, while the sonata in a single movement is essentially modern. This is an erroneous concept, since the sonata before Mozart was often written in one movement. And all in all, the norm of the whole sonata form is its first movement, the other movements being written in the various rondo forms are no more than additions to the first and most important section: Hence the fact that Scriabin wrote certain of his sonatas in one movement and others in several movements is of no importance as far as the development of his sonata music is concerned.

Speaking from the standpoint of form, his first and second sonatas are by no means masterful works, though the first, in three movements, is appreciated because of its funereal *finale*, and the second, in two, on account of its pathetic first movement. The third sonata has four movements; there is a dramatic first, a second full of genuine charm, and one of Scriabin's tempestuous *finales*. Among the works of the first period, this Third Sonata as also the second, is the most popular in Russia. Scriabin's Fourth Sonata is very laconic: it is the product of the time when Scriabin began to interest himself in musical mysticism, in the expression and idealization of man's psychic nature in the terms of tone. This sonata is notable for the ethereal lightness of its music—especially in the movement marked *prestissimo volando* there is an indescribable effect of a drawing away from earth, as it were.

The Fifth Sonata, the sketch for the *Poème d'Extase*, is inscribed with four lines from the extended poem which serves as a motto for the latter:

To life I summon you, O mystic forces,
In depths obscureimmerged!
To thee, creative spirit, to ye, life's timid embryos,
I now bring heart to dare!

It embodies the same ideas and uses the same material as its symphonic sequel. Compared to the Fourth Sonata, it deploys a more subtle harmonic style, and represents another rung in his ascending ladder of creation.

With the Sixth Sonata begins a new period in Scriabin's composition—a phase of greater complexity. It is less popular, and more rarely played in Russia than the others, for its playing demands a greater manual technic and a greater mental grasp; and it calls for more understanding on the part of the listener. An acquaintance with his previous works, and the ability to follow the development of his genius, however, will show that the means of expression he uses in the Sixth Sonata are altogether logical, and derived from its predecessors. But those whose first introduction to Scriabin comes by way of the Seventh or some later Sonata, are very apt to say that they cannot understand the Sixth.

From the point of view of movement there are great differences between the Fifth and Sixth Sonatas. The former is strongly movemented, the latter is altogether static. From the technical standpoint this is quite reasonable, since in order properly to express the extraordinarily complex harmonic beauties of the Sixth Sonata, rapid movement is practically precluded, in order that every note and every chord be given its proper meaning and emphasis.

In the Seventh Sonata, Scriabin's turbulent genius returns to the rapid movement he abandons in the Sixth. The Eighth Sonata is somewhat too long, too extended, and it is musically more feeble than either the Sixth or Seventh, though it also makes great demands on the pianist, and its second theme is one of the most delightful Scriabin ever wrote.

The Ninth and Tenth Sonatas, opening the period which, but for the intervention of fate, would have been the most interesting and important of his creative phases, stand for the exploitation of all the means which he employs in the preceding period, together with a new clarity and simplicity which bespeak the mastermind. Thanks to this clarity of expression these two sonatas are much more frequently played than those of Scriabin's second period. The Ninth Sonata is descriptive of sombre and evil influences; the Tenth, quite to the contrary, is not brilliant, yet

full of clarity, and has a third subject of remarkable beauty, one that might be likened to a psychic tonal expression of the purity of his ideals.

After Scriabin some account of the Sonatas written by his contemporaries is called for, though most of them have paid less attention to the form. Glazounoff, though his creative habit of mind is orchestral rather than pianistic, has provided the modern Russian sonata repertory with two fine works.

Glazounoff's two sonatas were written at the same time, and have nothing in common with those of Scriabin as regards style. Like all of Glazounoff's music—contrary to Scriabin's, replete with tumult, mystic eroticism, and psychic aspiration—these sonatas of Glazounoff are more sensuous, more “of the earth, earthy,” more healthily human. The spiritual element which pervades Scriabin's sonatas is represented in those of Glazounoff by the element of nationalism. His First Sonata, in B minor, is very popular in Russia, “sounds” admirably on the piano and is well worth the pianist's attention. It has even been used as a “test” piece in various competitive concerts by pianists in Russia. Yet while it is decidedly grateful for artist and audience, many serious pianists prefer the second.

This Second Sonata, in E minor, has a very intimate first movement, an extremely pianistic and effective *scherzo*, and a most interesting closing fugue.

Rachmaninoff, like Glazounoff, has written two sonatas; but while Glazounoff composed his one immediately after the other, Rachmaninoff wrote his first, in D minor, at the beginning of his career as a composer, and his second only a few years ago. The First Sonata has no very great musical value: it is dry, very long and, to be quite frank, a decided bore. Naturally, it is less popular in Russia than his other works, which have always been great favorites. It is programmatic in a way, its subject being “Faust,” and its three movements entitled respectively, “Faust,” “Gretchen” and “Mephistopheles.”

The Second Sonata, in B minor, is quite the opposite to the first. It is full of energetic movement and *brio* and Rachmaninoff has often played it in public with great success. Though there are passages which from a severely critical point of view might be regarded as mere musical “filling-in,” nevertheless there are numerous pages evincing great talent, and which have all that special quality of charm which Rachmaninoff's compositions possess. Needless to say, when played by so great a pianist as the composer the sonata seems perfection itself.

We now come to various composers little known in America; yet who have created very remarkable sonatas, as many as Scriabin himself—Nicolai Medtner, for instance, must command the keen interest and admiration of every musician who takes music seriously. Those looking for the gracefully light, the superficially attractive, will not find it in Medtner's sonatas, and Russia may well pride herself upon having produced a musician of such serious worth, who, despising the taste of the masses, writes music for music's sake.

Contrary to Scriabin, Medtner in his ten sonatas does not follow out any particular trends of development. They are all written with an admirable compositorial technic, and one very interesting for the pianist. Medtner has composed sonatas in one movement and in three movements; he has composed sonatas simple and complex. But his sonatas in every case represent his thoughts and ideas at the moment. His noblest sonata is probably the one in E minor, Op. 25, dedicated to Rachmaninoff. It is the most important, embodies the finest themes and shows a technic of development which is unparalleled. Unfortunately, owing to its great length and complexity, it is seldom played in public, even by the composer who, after Rachmaninoff, is one of Russia's greatest pianists. A very charming work is the "Sonata-Ballad" in F sharp minor, with a first movement in what might be called an epic pastoral style, and a fine concluding fugue. Then too, there are his "Sonata-Skazka" or "Sonata Tales," in C minor, also a less important work yet one decidedly attractive. And the "Sonata-Triad," Op. 11, a suite of Three Sonatas, simpler in style and less complex in development than the great E minor Sonata, is a work which voices a very legitimate appeal to the musician in general and the pianist in particular.

Even less known than the sonatas of Medtner are those of such pathfinders in untrodden fields of musical discovery as Serge Prokofieff and Nicolai Myaskovski, both of whom, like Scriabin, have given especial attention to the sonata. In fact, in the work of these three composers the modern Russian piano sonata may be said to reveal itself in its most characteristic form, in the most finished development of an expression based on radically different individualities and artistic trends.

Myaskovski, a soldier by profession—he served as a military engineer during the first three years of the war, and took part in General Brusiloff's offensive of 1916—is a very unique and individual personality in modern Russian music. His pianoforte sonatas are less known, for one reason, because, unlike Medtner,

Rachmaninoff and Prokofieff, he is no pianist, that is to say, no concert-pianist, and does not himself play them in public. Yet he has composed two very notable piano sonatas.

The First Sonata, in D minor, from a certain point of view is a work unique in the literature of the sonata, since it starts with a fugue. This fugue, beginning in the most simple and modest fashion, in severe classic style is carried through an ever-increasing *stretto* of development to an expansion which covers every register of the keyboard. This development is carried out with a gradual *crescendo* of effect, its slow and serious initial mood becoming more and more turbulent until it moves over into the agitated second movement representing the sonata *allegro*. The third and fourth movements of this sonata are somewhat too heavy and extended, which detracts from the impression made by the sonata as a whole.

The Second Sonata, in F sharp minor, written in one movement, is also a masterly work, sombre and passionate in mood, tempestuously agitated in expression, and the musician who does not know it suffers a very genuine loss. In this sonata the composer has introduced the mystic theme of the *Dies iræ*, harmonized in a most original manner.

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Serge Prokofieff, who frankly avows himself in the main "the pupil of his own ideas," is beyond question that Russian composer among "the younger set" whose work is exciting greater interest, both in his native land and abroad, than any of his contemporaries. He is less introspective than Myaskovski and more versatile than Stravinsky—who, obsessed by his theories anent the ballet, eschews opera, and has never attempted the sonata. Aside from three piano concertos Prokofieff has composed no less than four published sonatas for piano, (there are various others in MS.), ascending degrees in the ladder of musical self-development.

Born in 1891, a "Rubinstein piano prize" pupil of the Petrograd Conservatory, the composer, like Rachmaninoff, has that virtuose understanding of the keyboard instrument which enables him to develop his sonatas along the line of genuinely pianistic *media*. His First Sonata in F minor, a single movement work, is decidedly academic in form, though passionate and dramatic in mood. As far as its harmonic contents go it is not particularly modern; and cannot be said to represent its com-

poser's true style; something which, by the by, is hardly ever the case with a first opus.

The Second Sonata, in D minor, Op. 14, composed in 1912, is written in the regulation four movements: *Allegro non troppo*, *Scherzo*, *Andante* and *Vivace*. It is a work of very real interest and charm: the *Scherzo*, in particular, is a *brioso* movement of undeniable piquancy; the *Andante* shows emotional depth and appeals to the musician because of its admirably developed *ostinato*; the *Vivace*, Mendelssohnian only in its evanescent lightness and staccato flavor, supplies a climaxing movement of convincing effect. This sonata has been very successful in Russia where it has been much played.

The Third Sonata, in A minor, in one movement, is the composer's shortest work in the form. It pulses with a realism more harsh, an energy more stern and uncompromising than its predecessor. And yet, borne on the torrential current of its movement is a lyric theme of really exquisite beauty, one of the most searching and ingratiating to which the composer has been inspired. And the crashing vigor and unrelenting dissonant complexity of the major portion of the movement give these moments of lyric poesy a wonderful quality of clarity and distinction.

The Fourth Sonata, in C minor, the latest to appear in print, like the third has been developed *après des vieux cahiers*, "after old sketches," the embryonic themes and germinal ideas of older experimental sonatas "born to blush unseen." It is a work of outspoken sincerity, of deep and serious conviction which emphasizes the elemental appeal—what has been termed "the almost savage distinctness"—of all his mature work. Its inspiration is controlled by the "laconism," the avoidance of the tonally unessential which is one of the composer's main tenets of expression. Complexity of the whole concurrent with simplification of detail, worked out in decorative counterpoint and multiple theme combination are as characteristic of this sonata as of the composer's orchestral works. Like the sonatas of Myaskovski these of Prokofieff represent the outstanding, the challenging developments of the piano sonata in Russia since the death of Scriabin.